

# An overview of the advance of privatization of post-secondary education in Mexico

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## **Abstract**

Starting from a conceptual characterization of how neoliberal policies have been deployed in education, this paper presents on the deepening of the privatization of post-secondary education in Mexico. It is based on the description of the Post-secondary Education General Law -which is the guiding principle for policies- and some trends, such as the implementation of the hybrid model and the growth of distance education. It concludes by exploring the demands that have led teachers and students to protest in recent years.

**Key words:** post-secondary education, privatization, distance education.

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1. Members of the Grupo Tiempos Modernos (GTM), and of the Mexican section of the Trinational Coalition in Defense of Public Education, .

For the last four decades in Mexico, as in many other countries, the policies and trends guiding public education systems have been characterized by the implementation of neoliberalism. The deployment of "structural adjustments, and the imposition of a new scheme for financial discipline and the modernization of the State" have been the common features (Mollis, 2003).

The public sector has undergone processes of managerial transformation that have had an impact on educational systems. Since the 1990s, three important events have taken place in this field:

- 1) A theoretical adjustment of the pedagogical principles. Educational policy was reduced to the mere administration of reforms, from the perspective of quantitative indicators and results evaluation (Mollis, 2003).
- 2) An imminent threat arose through the incorporation of education in the Free Trade Agreements.

3) The liberalization of educational services. As part of the outcome of the Uruguay Round<sup>2</sup> of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the World Trade Organization (WTO) was established in 1995, which led to a wave of commodification of spheres previously protected by many constitutions as fundamental social rights (Leher, 2009).

In Mexico, this process began with the national agreement for the modernization of basic education during the administration of President Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), but it deepened with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, today USMCA). Furthermore, the process of assimilating education as a tradeable good and service was part of the approach that seeks greater integration with the United States.

Education policies in Mexico have centered around the management of reforms guided by the spirit of commodification, commercialization and privatization.

In 2018, at the beginning of the administration of Mexican president Manuel Lopez Obrador, there was much speculation about the possibility of changing the orientation of national education. However, as this administration ends, the balance of education and privatization is inconsistent to the commitments made by the outgoing president. It has been a negative one, since neoliberal policies remain.

We will now give an account of this situation through an overview of post-secondary education.

In 2023, the coverage of post-secondary education in Mexico was projected to reach a 34.7% (SEP, 2022), but currently approximately only 3 out of every 10 young people, between 18-22 years-old, are pursuing a professional career (INEGI, 2020). As a sign of inequality, of the 2,463 municipalities in the country "only 773 have at least one post-secondary education institution" (Contreras Suárez, 2022). Furthermore, only

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2. Multilateral trade negotiations conducted within the framework of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) from 1986 to 1993.

14% of public university students come from the first income quintile, that is, from the poorest population, in contrast to 41% who belong to the two richest quintiles (Moreno and Cedillo, 2023). This demonstrates that inequality persists when accessing higher education, despite it being a constitutional right.

The General Law of Post-secondary education (GES Law) was approved in 2020 with the aim of "making the right to post-secondary education a reality for all young Mexicans". This law places a new governance centerstage by centralizing power in the hands of public and private entities. An example is ANUIES<sup>3</sup>, an entity that openly promotes neoliberal policies in post-secondary education, through the National Council for the Coordination of Higher Education.

The law promotes the creation of a National Post-secondary Education System that homogenizes the different post-secondary education subsystems. Thus, it undermines the origin, mission and political and historical definitions of each subsystem and institution.

Likewise, neoliberal elements are now used as filters to restrict access, promotion and permanence in post-secondary education systems. The search for other income sources, such as the sale of services to private companies, collection permits and the lease of school property is now authorized. There is a promotion of education credits by private educational institutions; and dual education programs are now recognized as part of higher education.<sup>4</sup>

This is a mere addition to the series of privatizing transformations that post-secondary education had already undergone, even before the reform to the post-se-

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3. The National Association of Universities and Post-Secondary Education Institutions (ANUIES), founded in 1950, has participated in the definition of national programs, plans and policies. In recent times, it has been growing and in 2023, it joined the Autonomous University of Mexico City (UACM).

4. In order to broaden the analysis of this law, the Mexican section of the Trinational Coalition in Defense of Public Education prepared a comprehensive statement addressed to the Undersecretary of Post-secondary Education on December 14, 2022. For further reference: <https://coaliciontrinacional.org/mx/index.php>



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condary education Law. These include the collection of fees, curricular transformations at the service of the market and business, budget reductions, precarious working and study conditions, as well as career accreditation processes that externally intervene in curricular design. Evaluation and teaching systems that go against the autonomy of universities and national development were implemented, and certification processes that externally intervene in curricular design, evaluation and teaching systems. There are also violations of the autonomy of universities and the national development approach. For example, at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), 95% of its bachelor's degrees are currently externally accredited or in the process of becoming so.

Thus, the GES Law continues the new orientation of post-secondary education, surrendering it to com-

mercialization, privatization and commodification. It intersects with current trends that have accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic represented an opportunity for different actors that seek to lead society in a neoliberal direction to promote values and practices for the sole purpose of free trade facilitation.<sup>5</sup>

The massive closure of schools during the pandemic led to the implementation of online education as a national alternative, giving way to the use of connection platforms and later to the expansion of systems and platforms designed exclusively for non-face-to-face edu-

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5. The alliance formed by UNESCO with large corporations such as Google, Facebook and Microsoft, has resulted in the participation of these corporations in the formulation of global education policies under the auspices of UNESCO, through the development of digital education platforms, something that has been normalized since the pandemic. (Saura, 2021; Ponce-Díaz, Martínez and Beltrán, 2024).

cation. This has favored digital capitalism, surveillance, and the cultural hegemony of technology corporations.<sup>6</sup>

As the pandemic eased and there was a gradual return to schools, several post-secondary education institutions introduced the so-called hybrid model, which combines the school-based model with non-school-based education. It appears that this model is here to stay. In some cases, it is used as a political tool, since it allows for administrations to bypass strikes, whether student or teacher-led, by calling students to online classes. It justifies the use of public post-secondary education budgets to benefit companies that provide software and online platforms, transferring public resources to the private sector.

Another striking feature is that non-classroom education has been gaining ground in the country, especially since the pandemic. In a comparison between the school enrollment of the 2017-2018 school cycle (pre-pandemic) with the enrollment of the 2021-2022 cycle (post-pandemic), we see that enrollment grew by 10.7% in public post-secondary education. The growth was almost evenly distributed between both school-based education, with 136,000 new students, and non-school-based with 135,000. Meanwhile in private higher education, there was a decrease in the number of students enrolled in the school-based system, with a reduction of nine thousand students compared to the pre-pandemic school cycle. Non-school-based enrollment grew by 158,000 new students (Rodríguez, 2022).

According to these figures and in absolute terms, the school enrollment that has grown the most in post-pandemic post-secondary education is non-school enrollment, especially within private institutions. This gives rise to several questions: could it be that the pri-

vatization of education is advancing under the trend of distance education, mainly benefiting private post-secondary institutions (PSIs)? Could this be a test of how it will later advance in public PSIs? Why does the majority of the population opt for private PSIs and for the non-schooling modality? Furthermore, professional skills certification systems are growing day by day, as in the case of the online learning platform Coursera. With 5.4 million students, Mexico places third after the United States, where Coursera has 25 million students, and India, where there are 19 million students enrolled in this platform.

Finally, throughout the six-year term of outgoing President López Obrador, neoliberal policies in education have generated resistance in the field. The mobilizations and protests of the university community throughout the country reveal the precarious labor conditions faced by many teachers: lack of pay, job instability, expansion of the "subject" or fee-based teaching position, and other attacks on working conditions. Teachers of the Universities for the Wellbeing Benito Juárez García (UBBJG) -universities created by the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, supposedly to address the lack of student spaces - are demanding the right to *basificación* (formalizing the employment relationship with full benefits) and unionization, since many teachers are outsourced, and the agency in charge of the universities does not recognize them as employees. Meanwhile, the student body has mobilized to denounce the deterioration of education facilities, lack of equipment and materials, the cutbacks to scholarships, delayed payments and sexual violence. They are also asking for a larger education budget.

Education communities urgently need to deepen our discussions about the progress and trends of privatization in education. In this way, we can respond to this silent offensive.

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6. Dr. Larry Kuehn states that education is very rich in data. Every action taken by a student and any interaction between the student, the teacher and other students, is potential data, but the challenge is how to collect this data and then monetize it, which is what the big information companies have been working on. <https://idea-network.ca/es/?p=241>



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